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The Dehumanization of Immigrants and Refugees:

A Comparison of Dehumanizing Rhetoric by All Candidates in Three U.S. Presidential Elections

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## Abstract

This study contributes to contemporary dehumanization theory by tracking and comparing dehumanizing rhetoric used by all presidential candidates during the 2008, 2012, and 2016 elections. Using data hand-collected from all presidential speeches conducted during these periods, including accounting for adlibbing by Donald Trump, I argue that Trump was distinctive in his dehumanization of immigrants and refugees, far surpassing all other candidates. His language surrounding these groups focused heavily on 1) using non-human language to describe their actions and migrations; 2) assigning criminality and viciousness to immigrants; 3) repeating stories of the deaths of American citizens by immigrants; 4) saying that immigrants and refugees have values incongruent with Americans; and 5) emphasizing the idea that immigrants and refugees are a threat to the American way of life. Dehumanization is often used as justification for aggressive policies and behaviors, which has been demonstrated through the Trump administration's family separation policies. This paper adds to the conversation about dehumanization by providing evidence that Trump presents a major increase in dehumanizing rhetoric compared to previous candidates, which is important to note as new policies unfold. Additionally, it provides a foundation of collected data for future studies.

*Keywords: dehumanization; immigrants; refugees; gangs; 2016 presidential election; Donald Trump; family separation*

## Introduction

Presidential campaigns can be very telling of majority ideologies, and the rhetoric used during campaign speeches can be important for priming citizens to support or reject certain policies before the candidate takes office. Throughout the 2016 presidential campaign, people raised concerns that Donald Trump was engaging in dehumanizing language and fear-mongering tactics (Kteily & Bruneau, 2017a). Though disturbing to many, it did not seem to shake his base (Kteily & Bruneau, 2017a). But how did his use of dehumanizing rhetoric compare to other candidates in recent elections?

Dehumanization has played a major role in atrocities of the past. However, it is still very present today, and is far from rare or inconsequential (Kteily & Bruneau, 2017b). One of the most foundational studies in dehumanization theory is the “Ascent of Man” study by Kteily, Bruneau, Waytz, & Cotterill (2015). In this study, participants rated various groups on a scale of how evolved they perceive the groups to be (see Figure 1). This study discovered that blatant dehumanization is associated with more support for an oppressive hierarchy and aggressive actions, as well as showing that those with authoritarian attitudes are more likely to participate in blatant dehumanization (Kteily, Bruneau, Waytz, & Cotterill, 2015). Interestingly, it also found that having a dehumanizing attitude towards one group is predictive of having the same attitude towards other groups and that these attitudes get stronger after instances of intergroup violence (Kteily, Bruneau, Waytz, & Cotterill, 2015).

Dehumanization also leads to moral exclusion, which involves placing the out-group beyond the bounds of morality and fairness (Opotow, 1990). This allows the in-group to morally disengage from the out-group, shedding their responsibility to treat the out-group humanely. Essentially, it creates an environment in which “no moral relationship with the victim inhibits the victimizer’s violent behavior” (Kelman, 1973). The lack of connection fostered by this environment has outcomes that vary from indifference to genocide (Opotow, 1990), and will almost certainly lead to social conflict and aggression (Opotow, 1990).

Citizenship has been a factor frequently exploited by dehumanizing rhetoric across time. The likelihood of in-groups targeting non-citizens increases during times of economic distress or hardship (Geschiere, as cited in Weiner, 2012). It is a particularly easy group to target because citizens and non-citizens are mutually exclusive; it is not possible to be legally both a citizen and not a citizen. This makes it far easier for in-groups to define the bounds of their supremacy, creating a wall between those who belong and those who do not (Bar-Tal, as cited in Haslam, 2006). Citizenship dehumanization is closely tied to nationalism. It both stems from it and fosters it. However, dehumanization around citizenship does not even need to be explicitly nationalistic to carry forth nationalism – if the citizenship requirements are structured to exclude based on measures like language requirements, that serves nationalism and the “othering” of non-citizens (Seymour, Coture, & Nielsen, as cited in Weiner, 2012). In many cases citizenship requirements also exclude based on race, whether explicitly or implicitly (Bonilla-Silva 2007). State control is also a factor. Across time, political leaders in a variety of countries have suggested or implemented measures to control immigrants, including extra

surveillance, random searches, or making immigrants keep their documentation on their person (Goldberg, as cited in Weiner, 2012). One recent example of this from the United State is SB 1070, an Arizona law sanctioning police to investigate the immigration status of anyone arrested or detained who they suspect to be undocumented (ACLU, 2012). This continues to be highly contested, as it promotes racism and contributes to the “othering” of immigrants. It promotes the criminalization of immigrants, which as discussed, is a subset of dehumanization. The dehumanizing rhetoric surrounding citizenship and immigration tends to include words like “invasion,” “infestation,” “flooding,” and “overrun.” It frames immigrants as a danger and a security threat, bringing crime, violence, and incongruent values into the country. This language promotes fear in the in-group and encourages them to cling to their perceived supremacy and control (Bar-Tal, as cited in Haslam, 2006) by rejecting immigrants and promoting aggressive anti-immigrant behavior (Kteily, Bruneau, Waytz, & Cotterill, 2015).

## Methods

This paper looks into the question of whether or not Trump participates in dehumanizing rhetoric significantly more than other candidates across time. It also looks at which types of dehumanization are utilized and which groups are targeted. It uses qualitative content analysis of speeches delivered on the campaign trail by all of the presidential candidates from the 2008, 2012, and 2016 elections. All speeches were found on The American Presidency Project website, which is a leading archival resource on run out of the University of California, Santa Barbara (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/index.php>). This website primarily contains scripts for speeches, not the transcripts of what was directly said, though they do have direct transcripts available for some speeches. Because Donald Trump has been known to go off script more than other candidates (Harrington, 2018; Kosoff, 2017), his speeches were analyzed by comparing the scripts found on The American Presidency Project to full recordings found on YouTube and C-SPAN and variations were noted. For speeches by all other candidates, only the scripts were analyzed. The following words were searched for: immigrant, migrant, Dreamer, alien, gang, cartel, refugee, asylee, and asylum-seeker. Each mention of these words was counted. If a sentence used a pronoun to refer to these topics, it too was counted. Compound sentences containing distinct thoughts about these topics were counted separately for each thought.

When I came across each mention of these words, I asked two questions: 1) Does this sentence use language primarily associated with humans or with objects and/or animals? 2) If so, under which category of dehumanization does it fall? If sentences used words or phrases that are commonly used to describe non-human entities (example: ‘pouring’ and ‘flooding’ generally refer to water, not people), then that mention was counted as dehumanizing and the sentence or phrase was separately noted. If a sentence focused on criminality, danger, or fear, it was counted and noted as well.

## Results

Table 1 shows each candidate in the 2008, 2012, and 2016 election and how many times they used dehumanizing language surrounding immigrants/aliens, migrants, refugees, gangs, cartels,

and asylum-seekers. It also includes a count of how many campaign speeches they delivered for context on the frequency of dehumanizing language.

Table 1: Total use of dehumanizing language from each presidential candidate.

| 2008             |                          |                                     |
|------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Candidate        | Total Number of Speeches | Total Uses of Dehumanizing Language |
| Joseph Biden     | 12                       | 0                                   |
| Hillary Clinton  | 107                      | 1                                   |
| Christopher Dodd | 3                        | 0                                   |
| John Edwards     | 28                       | 0                                   |
| Rudy Giuliani    | 38                       | 0                                   |
| Mike Huckabee    | 15                       | 1                                   |
| John McCain      | 174                      | 0                                   |
| Barak Obama      | 227                      | 4                                   |
| Bill Richardson  | 31                       | 8                                   |
| Mitt Romney      | 34                       | 0                                   |
| Fred Thompson    | 16                       | 1                                   |

| 2012             |                          |                                     |
|------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Candidate        | Total Number of Speeches | Total Uses of Dehumanizing Language |
| Michele Bachmann | 8                        | 0                                   |
| Herman Cain      | 3                        | 0                                   |
| Newt Gingrich    | 16                       | 0                                   |
| Jon Huntsman     | 6                        | 0                                   |
| Barack Obama     | 103                      | 0                                   |
| Ron Paul         | 11                       | 0                                   |
| Tim Pawlenty     | 3                        | 0                                   |
| Rick Perry       | 11                       | 0                                   |
| Mitt Romney      | 100                      | 2                                   |
| Rick Santorum    | 17                       | 0                                   |

| 2016            |                          |                                     |
|-----------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Candidate       | Total Number of Speeches | Total Uses of Dehumanizing Language |
| Jeb Bush        | 6                        | 0                                   |
| Ben Carson      | 2                        | 0                                   |
| Lincoln Chafee  | 3                        | 0                                   |
| Chris Christie  | 2                        | 0                                   |
| Hillary Clinton | 90                       | 1                                   |
| Ted Cruz        | 6                        | 1                                   |

|                 |    |     |
|-----------------|----|-----|
| Carly Fiorina   | 1  | 0   |
| Lindsey Graham  | 3  | 2   |
| Mike Huckabee   | 1  | 0   |
| Bobby Jindal    | 1  | 1   |
| John Kasich     | 2  | 1   |
| Martin O'Malley | 12 | 0   |
| Rand Paul       | 2  | 0   |
| George Pataki   | 1  | 0   |
| Rick Perry      | 5  | 0   |
| Marco Rubio     | 4  | 0   |
| Bernie Sanders  | 61 | 1   |
| Rick Santorum   | 3  | 4   |
| Donald Trump    | 74 | 464 |
| Scott Walker    | 3  | 0   |
| Jim Webb        | 1  | 0   |

To help make sense of this data, see Table 2, which lists each candidate who engaged in dehumanizing rhetoric and puts the frequency in context of the number of speeches given. (Total number of mentions/Total number of speeches; rounded to the hundredth). Table 3 breaks down each mention to show trends in which groups are dehumanized more than others. Immigrants and refugees are more frequently dehumanized than the other groups observed.

Table 2: Frequency of mentions (mentions over total number of speeches); lowest to highest

| Candidate         | Frequency |
|-------------------|-----------|
| Clinton (2008)    | 0.01      |
| Clinton (2016)    | 0.01      |
| Obama (2008)      | 0.02      |
| Romney (2012)     | 0.02      |
| Sanders (2012)    | 0.02      |
| Thompson (2008)   | 0.06      |
| Huckabee (2008)   | 0.07      |
| Cruz (2016)       | 0.17      |
| Richardson (2008) | 0.26      |
| Kasich (2016)     | 0.50      |
| Graham (2016)     | 0.67      |
| Jindal (2016)     | 1.00      |
| Santorum (2016)   | 1.33      |
| Trump (2016)      | 6.27      |

Table 3: Dehumanizing language by group<sup>a</sup>

| Candidate  | Year | Total Dehumanizing Mentions | Immigrant <sup>b</sup> | Dreamer | Gang | Cartel | Refugee | Asylee <sup>c</sup> |
|------------|------|-----------------------------|------------------------|---------|------|--------|---------|---------------------|
| Clinton    | 2008 | <b>1</b>                    | 0                      | 0       | 0    | 0      | 1       | 0                   |
| Clinton    | 2016 | <b>1</b>                    | 0                      | 0       | 1    | 0      | 0       | 0                   |
| Cruz       | 2016 | <b>1</b>                    | 0                      | 0       | 0    | 0      | 1       | 0                   |
| Graham     | 2016 | <b>2</b>                    | 0                      | 0       | 0    | 0      | 2       | 0                   |
| Huckabee   | 2008 | <b>1</b>                    | 1                      | 0       | 0    | 0      | 0       | 0                   |
| Jindal     | 2016 | <b>1</b>                    | 1                      | 0       | 0    | 0      | 0       | 0                   |
| Kasich     | 2016 | <b>1</b>                    | 0                      | 0       | 0    | 0      | 1       | 0                   |
| Obama      | 2008 | <b>4</b>                    | 0                      | 0       | 1    | 1      | 2       | 0                   |
| Richardson | 2008 | <b>8</b>                    | 1                      | 0       | 0    | 0      | 7       | 0                   |
| Romney     | 2012 | <b>2</b>                    | 2                      | 0       | 0    | 0      | 0       | 0                   |
| Sanders    | 2016 | <b>1</b>                    | 1                      | 0       | 0    | 0      | 0       | 0                   |
| Santorum   | 2016 | <b>4</b>                    | 4                      | 0       | 0    | 0      | 0       | 0                   |
| Thompson   | 2008 | <b>1</b>                    | 1                      | 0       | 0    | 0      | 0       | 0                   |
| Trump      | 2016 | <b>464</b>                  | 267                    | 0       | 47   | 20     | 142     | 6                   |

<sup>a</sup> These counts include all mentions of the word, including multiple mentions in a single sentence, and all pronouns referring to that word.

<sup>b</sup> This category includes related words like migrant and alien.

<sup>c</sup> This category includes related words like asylum-seeker and asylum.

## Discussion

Clearly, Trump is distinctive in his frequency of using dehumanizing language. He far surpasses all other candidates in the past three elections. This study builds on past research reporting that immigrants felt particularly dehumanized by Trump by quantitatively supporting that feeling. Immigrants are right to feel singled out and dehumanized by Trump compared to all other candidates in either party in the past three election cycles.

The way Trump discusses immigrants, refugees, gangs, cartels, and asylum-seekers is rife with dehumanizing language. He leans heavily towards animalistic dehumanization rather than mechanistic dehumanization, focusing on the denial of human uniqueness. He frames these groups as lacking morals and restraint, spreading violence, sex, impulsivity, and criminality throughout the country. He describes these groups as immoral and/or amoral, and directly draws upon disgust in some of his comments, which is a common tool in denying human uniqueness in particular. All of these strategies are hallmarks of dehumanization rhetoric (Haslam, 2006).

The way the people respond to dehumanizing rhetoric is very telling of dominant ideology, as is the way they respond to dehumanizing policies. Zero tolerance for immigrants appeared to be widely supported by Trump's base during the campaign, and support hovered at about 50%



during the implementation of the family separation policy. Though zero tolerance was supported by half the country, the separation was supported by a smaller faction – only 18% strongly approved and 14% somewhat approved (O'Neil, 2018). Public disapproval was likely a factor in the president's executive order, which he claimed provided a solution (Savage, 2018) – however, the order maintains zero tolerance and prosecution, meaning that families will be kept together, but they will still be in detention centers. This requires the Department of Justice to request a federal court to modify the law that prevents children from being detained for more than 20 days (Jarrett & Foran, 2018). At the time this paper was written, this has not been decided yet. However, if it is modified to Trump's favor, this could have long-lasting dehumanizing consequences for these children. Both solutions put forth by the Trump administration (a. family separation and detention; or b. family unification and detention) result in denying these groups a future, severely restricting their autonomy and freedom to move, and the removal of resources and opportunity from immigrants. These are all touchstones of dehumanization. In many cases, the policies also lead to long-lasting trauma for these children, whether it is from being held and/or separated from parents or from experiencing abuse at the hands of those running the detention facilities, as has been made public with increasing frequency (Gonzales, 2018). As aforementioned, dehumanization is both a pre-condition and a consequence of violence (Haslam, 2006), but it is also a cycle. These policy events were enabled and justified through dehumanization, and they will also likely lead to more violence, aggressive policies, and further dehumanization.

## Conclusion

This paper investigated reports that Mexican immigrants felt particularly dehumanized by Donald Trump by comparing dehumanizing comments towards immigrants, refugees, gangs, and asylum-seekers spoken by all presidential candidates during the 2008, 2012, and 2016 elections. It found that Trump was quite distinctive in his use of dehumanization. All other candidates ranged from 0-8 dehumanizing comments over the total election cycle, while Trump had 464. This is important to note, as dehumanization leads to aggression towards out-groups and is used as justification for violence towards them. We see this playing out in real-time through the separation and detention of immigrant families at the border, which continues to be an issue as the government struggles to reunite families who they have partially deported or lost track of.

Future research is needed to continue tracking the use of dehumanizing rhetoric of any out-group by political leaders and the public. Dehumanization towards one group is predictive of the dehumanization of other marginalized groups, and we must be vigilant about this issue. Dehumanization is accompanied by danger and violence, and it is imperative to end it before it becomes a culturally ingrained attitude towards a group. Opposing dehumanization is an active process that requires research and engagement from communities to produce lasting change.

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